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252222Z Aug 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 BOGOTA 008051

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SENSITIVE

SANTIAGO, PLEASE PASS TO CODEL COLEMAN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL CO

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL COLEMAN'S VISIT TO COLOMBIA

Summary

¶11. (SBU) Post warmly welcomes CODEL Coleman's visit to Colombia. With USG assistance, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has made great strides in fighting drug trafficking and terrorism. A nation-wide, multi-phased offensive by the security forces has re-taken key territory from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The peace process with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) has already resulted in the demobilization of almost 9,000 paramilitaries with several thousand more expected. Colombia's human rights record, although imperfect, is improving. Executive-legislative relations have been tense, but Uribe managed to push through some important legislation, including a bill to allow presidential re-election. The economy continues to improve and FTA talks have concluded the eleventh round. Three U.S. citizens have been held hostage by the FARC for two and a half years now; their safe recovery continues to be one of our top priorities. Uribe is a strong proponent of extradition. End Summary.

U.S. Assistance Key to Security Improvements

¶12. (SBU) USG Assistance to Colombia (Plan Colombia) is premised on combating the interrelated issues of drug trafficking and terrorism and includes training, material aid, and guidance to the security forces and other institutions. President Uribe and Colombian Minister of Defense (MOD) Camilo Ospina have characterized U.S. assistance as key to the GOC's "Democratic Security Policy" and acknowledged the United States as Colombia's most important ally. Since taking office, President Uribe has focused on establishing a state presence throughout national territory.

-- Plan Patriota: The military's multi-phased campaign plan to re-take areas dominated by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is entering its third year. The first phase, which focused on securing Cundinamarca Department, which surrounds Bogota, pushed the FARC presence out of reach of the capital and resulted in the deaths of at least five mid-level FARC commanders. The second, much more complex phase has reached the eighteen month mark and is focused on the FARC's traditional stronghold in southeastern Colombia. Infectious diseases - especially leishmaniasis, a parasitic skin and intestinal infection - and landmines are the leading causes of military casualties.

-- FARC Attacks: FARC violence in the first half of 2005, although tactically aggressive, remained more a political tool than military tactic.

-- Center for Coordinated Integral Action: With support from the U.S. MILGRP, the GOC formed an interagency center to facilitate social services in seven areas that have traditionally suffered from little state presence and pressure from illegal armed groups. The Center focuses on providing immediate social services, including documentation and medical clinics, and establishing longer term projects, such as economic reactivation. Approximately 40,000 individuals have been enrolled in state health care, judges, investigators, and public defenders have been placed in all 16 municipalities of the Plan Patriota area, and a public library was recently opened in the town of San Vicente del Caguán, which had long been dominated by the FARC.

-- Drug Eradication: Eradication and interdiction are at record levels. As of August 2005, over 110,000 hectares of coca and 1,500 hectares of opium poppy had been sprayed since the beginning of 2005, and 15,500 hectares of coca and poppy were manually eradicated. Ground fire against spray planes is well below 2003 levels but remains problematic.

-- Plan Colombia II: The GOC committed to provide us with a draft proposal of Plan Colombia II soon. Most of the program

areas outlined are a continuation of the same goals the US has supported since Plan Colombia's inception in 2000. Congress will be asked to consider one new program area, which includes peace negotiations, demobilization, and reintegration of illegal armed groups.

U.S. Assistance to Development and Democracy-Building

13. (U) The USAID mission in Colombia funds programs to improve transparency of the justice system, assist farmers in growing alternative legal crops and livestock production, and supports more than 1.4 million Colombians displaced from the internal violence. USAID is also strengthening a center to support children who had been forced to serve as child combatants. These programs help reinforce Colombian society's democratic and social institutions.

Military Justice

14. (U) The Colombian military justice system has been criticized for inefficiency and weakness. We have emphasized the importance of creating a system that delivers credible findings to ensure expeditious justice for both the innocent and the guilty. In April, the Military Penal Justice Director submitted a "shock" reform package to Congress as the first step towards institutional streamlining. A second reform package, slated for Congressional review in the next few weeks, would improve the long-term functioning of the institution.

Extradition

15. (SBU) President Uribe is a strong supporter of the U.S.-GOC extradition relationship, and since taking office has approved more than 250 extraditions to the U.S. President Uribe, the prosecutor general and other senior GOC officials have expressed concern about the impact of the Deal Amendment in the Senate version of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill.

Peace Process

16. (SBU) The GOC has been holding negotiations with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) since 2002. Almost 9,000 paramilitaries have demobilized thus far. The GOC has said up to 10,000 more paramilitaries could demobilize by the end of Uribe's term in August 2006. The GOC has repeatedly stated that the peace process will not damage the excellent U.S.-Colombia extradition relationship.

-- Aid to Demobilizations: Almost 9,000 paramilitaries have demobilized since Uribe took office, and he plans to demobilize the rest of the paramilitaries by year's end. Colombia has requested U.S aid for the demobilization and reinsertion process, including police aid to prevent FARC inroads in areas formerly under paramilitary domination.

-- Deserters: Since Uribe took office, almost 8,000 illegal armed group members have deserted and entered the government's reinsertion program. The program has limited funding and logistical problems, but is slowly improving.

17. (SBU) The Mexican government was facilitating peace talks between the GOC and the National Liberation Army (ELN), but the ELN has refused to suspend kidnapping. The ELN unilaterally ended the facilitation process on April 18. The FARC has shown no willingness to have peace talks or hold a "humanitarian exchange" to swap prisoners, but the GOC continues to attempt talks with both groups. President Uribe accepted the Catholic Church's offer to broker a cease-fire with the ELN and the FARC on August 23.

18. (U) President Uribe approved the Justice and Peace Law in July and established mechanisms to hold demobilized terrorists accountable for their crimes. The law offers demobilized terrorists a five to eight year sentence followed by a 2.5 to four year parole period only if they fully demobilize, turn over all illicit assets, release all hostages and child soldiers, and give reparations to victims. Individuals or groups organized for drug trafficking or illicit enrichment would not be eligible for reduced sentence. Only crimes committed during membership in, and in the service of, the illegal armed group would be eligible. The law has been criticized since the debate phase about being too soft on criminals, but implementation will be the key to ensure that both the goals of peace and justice are realized.

Human Rights Record Improving

¶ 19. (SBU) The Uribe Administration continues to make progress on human rights. Homicides fell by 16 percent, kidnappings by 42 percent, and forced displacements by 37 percent in 2004, building on 2003's trends. The GOC increased its dialogue with NGOs, the UN, and foreign governments, hosting meetings with local and international human rights organizations that included over 40 hours of discussions on the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights' 27 human rights recommendations for Colombia. Human rights training is mandatory for all members of the military and police. Less than two percent of human rights violations are attributable to government security forces, according to GOC statistics. Recent credible allegations of violations by members of the armed forces demonstrate the need for further improvement.

¶ 10. (SBU) On February 20 or 21, eight civilians, including three members of the San Jose de Apartado peace community, were killed by unknown actors. The Colombian government immediately condemned the killings and initiated an investigation. On February 25, a commission of civilian prosecutors, investigators, ballistics experts, and others arrived at the remote gravesites in La Resbalosa where they recovered 18 types of ballistic evidence, biological evidence, personal effects, and other items. The team was then ambushed, allegedly by FARC guerrillas, on March 2 and one policeman was killed. In April, 2005, the commission returned to the site to collect additional ballistics, topographic, and photographic evidence. During this investigation, the Prosecutor General's Office determined that a powerful object, possibly a mortar, was detonated in the kitchen of one of the victims. In addition, the commission went to the headquarters of the 17th Brigade to obtain aerial locations and operations orders for the region near the massacre site, took two declarations, and investigated the types of arms and munitions used by a battalion of the Brigade during the period of February 17-23.

The commission returned to the massacre site the week of August 8.

Internal Politics

¶ 11. (SBU) Executive-legislative relations have been tense over the last two years. A major issue has been Uribe's break with traditional pork barrel projects and patronage for members of Congress, and many have exacted payback on the GOC as a result. Uribe's presidential reelection reform initiative, however, was passed by Congress in December. The Constitutional Court is currently reviewing the reform, and it remains to be seen if it will strike the measure down. Uribe's popularity is over 70 percent and he is expected to win an additional four year term if the Constitutional Court upholds the reelection law. Other major issues before Congress include pension and tax reform, both controversial proposals that face tough sledding.

¶ 12. (SBU) Elections for Congress and President will be held in March and May 2006, respectively. The current Congressional session began on July 20 and will likely center around campaigning and the upcoming Congressional elections in March 2006.

Positive Economic Outlook

¶ 13. (U) Tremendous gains in security have helped the Colombian economy. In 2004, Colombia's gross domestic product (GDP) increased by 4.1 percent to nearly USD 90.8 billion. Colombian exports grew 26 percent in 2004 to USD 16 billion. Exports to the U.S. grew by USD 1 billion. The Colombian Congress recently passed a pension reform package that will improve the long-term sustainability of the country's retirement system. Although the International Monetary Fund has recommended that Colombia revamp its tax system, fiscal reform was not addressed during this session of Congress. Unemployment remains high, near 12 percent, but the rate has been declining since the beginning of the Uribe administration.

¶ 14. (U) The eleventh round of negotiations toward a free trade agreement with Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru took place in Miami last month. The talks are progressing slowly, with agricultural issues representing the biggest stumbling block. As the Colombian political season approaches, negotiators are concerned that significant delays in completing the agreement this year could put the FTA on hold until late 2006, at the earliest.

U.S. Hostages

115. (SBU) In February 2003, a DOD plane carrying four USG contractors and a Colombian military representative crashed in FARC-controlled territory in southern Colombia. The three surviving hostages' safe release continues to be one of our top priorities.
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